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# Work, Family, and Managerial Attitudes and Practices in the European Workplace: Comparing Dutch, British, and Slovenian Financial Sector Managers

## Abstract

*Managers are key actors shaping employees' capabilities to utilize work–life policies. However, most research on managers' implementation of these policies has been conducted in liberal welfare states and ignores the impact of institutional context. In this study, we situate managers within specific workplace and national layers of context. We investigated how managers in financial organizations in the Netherlands, UK, and Slovenia talk about the utilization of work–life policies. Managers' discourses stressed disruption and dependency considerations in these case studies, as in*

*the US research. However, a further management discourse of the moral case or right thing to do also emerged. The lack of resources for replacing staff on leave creates disruption and reduces managers' capability to support the use of work–life policies, even when they are statutory or if managers are inclined to be supportive (dependency or moral argument). This is likely to impact on parents' capabilities.*

## Introduction

Over the last few decades there has been growing attention to the reconciliation of employment with the needs of personal life. National governments, trade union, and employer representatives, i.e., works councils, and individual employers have introduced work–life policies and regulations, such as flexible working arrangements, reduction of working hours, and leave arrangements. However, employees do not always utilize policies and arrangements, even when they need to do so (Anderson, Coffey, and Byerly 2002; Eaton 2003; Lewis 2003), which suggests that there are constraints influencing individual capabilities and agency to take-up these policies. The capabilities approach (Sen 1999) provides a framework for capturing the multilevel processes that embed individual agency into specific institutional/normative settings. Hobson and Fahlén (2009) focus on the capabilities and agency freedom of fathers to reduce working hours in ten European countries, representing various welfare state regimes. European fathers show substantial inequalities in their ability to achieve a work–family balance that fits with the ideal of the modern, caring, and active father. These inequalities in agency occur not only within national policy contexts, with varying care services, benefit levels, and gendered working time norms, but also at the workplace level. It is at the workplace and work-organizational level that formal work–life policies are converted into entitlements and claims, where requests are granted or denied. Bonvin and Farvaque (2003) highlight the importance of the implementation of policies through local actors (in their case, social agencies at the municipal level) who mediate and translate policies that can enhance or weaken the capabilities and agency of individuals. Within work organizations managers play a crucial role in the conversion of rights into entitlements of employees to use work–life policies. By studying managerial attitudes and practices concerning work–life policies, which is the focus of this paper, we investigate how institutional factors can influence the potential capabilities of workers for a better work–life balance.

This analytical approach focusing on the structural and cultural constraints within firms allows for interesting comparisons across

countries and/or firms. It also highlights factors or policies that could be envisaged to widen employees' opportunities for better integration of work and private life. This article examines the phase after work–life policies are adopted, whether at the national level through statutory provisions or at the organizational level, through mechanisms such as collective agreements and company policies. The broader institutional context can be seen as a frame in which managers' attitudes toward work–family issues develop and work–life policy decisions are mediated. In turn, managerial behavior forms an institutional constraint or support for individual work–family balance.

Work–life policies, whether statutory or organizational, often contain an element of managers' discretion. The introduction of performance-related human resource management practices and the general trend toward decentralization—in which human resource (HR) practices have been devolved to line managers—have made the role of managers even more important (Wise and Bond 2003). While HR managers often play a supportive role, it is the line manager who implements employee requests for work–life arrangements. However, managers often work long hours, and are less likely to use work–life policies than non-managerial employees (Poelmans and Beham 2005; den Dulk and Peper 2007). Hence, managers are seldom role models in policy utilization and are often seen as gatekeepers to the take-up of policies.

Few researchers have examined the factors that shape their practical implementation of work–life policies (Poelmans and Beham 2005; den Dulk and de Ruijter 2008) particularly as part of multilayer dynamics influencing the impact of policies in specific contexts. In this article, we explore managers' attitudes to and experiences of work–life policies in finance organizations in three countries: the Netherlands, the UK, and Slovenia representing different European welfare state contexts: the UK approximates a liberal welfare state with minimal state regulation and emphasis on the business case for work–life policies; the Netherlands is a conservative welfare state, with moderate statutory work–life policies but with a stronger regulative framework of legislation and collective agreements than the UK; Slovenia represent the post-socialist context with a strong tradition of state support for reconciling work and family. How do managers respond to work–life policies in practice in three organizations across national contexts? Below we discuss the theoretical background of the article and national contexts in more detail.

## Background and Theory

Research on the management of work–life policies has mainly been conducted in the United States, the UK, or Canada (den Dulk and Peper 2009); welfare state regimes in which the business case is often the dominant management rationale, permitting considerable scope for managerial discretion. Within this context, theories of management decision-making revolve around potential disruptiveness or dependency considerations that result from implementing work–life balance policies (Powell and Mainiero 1999; Klein, Berman, and Dickson 2000). According to the disruptiveness hypothesis, managers consider granting a request for a work–life policy based on whether it will disrupt the department’s work. Powell and Mainiero (1999) argue that managers are rewarded primarily for the results achieved in their work units rather than demonstrating sensitivity to their employees’ work–life balance. Hence, they may be unwilling to grant requests that they believe will disrupt the conduct of work. Based on a study of US attorneys, Klein et al. (2000) argue that managers may be more likely to grant requests for flexibility from valued, difficult to replace, employees. In this study, we examine whether these considerations also play a role in managerial attitudes toward work–life policies in firms in European societies with different national cultures and welfare regime configurations.

Comparative research on managerial attitudes and experiences with work–life policies is limited; managers are mostly studied in their organizational context. Organizational case study research emphasizes how managerial behaviors shape and are shaped by organizational culture. A manager’s response to work–life policies is influenced not only by official policy, but also by the “unwritten rules” of an employing organization (Perlow 1995; Lewis 1997). However, organizational culture does not exist in a vacuum and develops in relation to national culture and policy contexts. By analyzing similar organizational case studies across different national context, the influence of institutional factors may come to the fore.

At the national level, legislation may encourage a social climate in which employers and managers are expected to show support for the combination of work and personal life (den Dulk 2001). Managers are expected to be more positive toward policy utilization in national contexts with generous statutory work–family provisions like Slovenia, than managers in a context of limited state support, as is the case in the UK and the Netherlands where statutory provisions as well as formal organizational policies incorporate an element of line managerial discretion. In both countries managers can decline a request to reduce working hours on the basis of business needs

Table 1. Statutory Leaves and Flexible Work Policies in the UK, Netherlands and Slovenia<sup>a</sup>*The UK*

26 weeks maternity leave regardless of service. Women who have worked for their present employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the qualifying week are entitled to an additional 26 weeks, this gives a total absence of 52 weeks of maternity leave. Payment is 90 percent of average salary for 6 weeks; the remaining 20 weeks are paid at 100 pounds per week or 90 percent of your weekly wages, whichever is smaller. Remaining period is unpaid.

2 weeks paternity leave (since 2003), flat rate payment

13 weeks parental leave, unpaid

Right to flexibility (change in number of hours, timing of hours, and location of work) for parents with children under 6 years or a disabled child under 18 years (since 2003). Since 2007 this right is extended to care for an adult.

Employers may refuse request in case of clear business grounds for doing so.

*The Netherlands*

16 weeks maternity leave, fully paid

2 days paternity leave, fully paid (since 2001)

13 weeks parental leave, unpaid<sup>b</sup> (since 1991). Since 2009, parental leave was extended to 26 weeks.

10 days short-term care leave, paid at 70 percent of salary (since 2001)

Right to reduce or extend working hours unless this conflicts with serious business needs (2001)

Child care act (2005)

Life course policy

*Slovenia*

105 days (15 weeks) maternity leave, fully paid

90 days paternity leave (since 2003, gradually introduced; 15 days fully paid;

75 days social security contribution based on minimal wage)

260 days (37, 14 weeks) parental leave, fully paid (from 1975, 141 days; since 1986, 260 days)

The right to work part-time until the child is 3 years of age or 18 years in case of a disabled child

<sup>a</sup>The policies described are the policies available at the moment of research, 2003–2006 unless stated otherwise.

<sup>b</sup>The first thirteen-week employees working in the public sector receive 70 percent of their salary, in the private sector parental leave is unpaid.

Source: OECD Family database, 2010 [www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database).

(see table 1), although the scope of managerial discretion is greater in the UK than in the Netherlands, where the right to reduce working hours is embedded in a wider framework of working time policies. Moreover, the right to request flexible working is restricted

to working parents and carers in the UK, but not the Netherlands (Fagan and Walthery 2011; Fagan, Hegewisch, and Pillinger 2006). Consequently, employees' sense of entitlement may have grown more in the Dutch than in the UK context, the result of stronger moral and legal pressures on Dutch managers.

Slovenia has a tradition of state responsibility for the integration of policies that support work and family life. It introduced parental leave in 1975 long before it was introduced in the Netherlands in 1991, and in 1999 in the UK. Full employment for men and women was an important element of socialist social policy, supplemented by insurance-based social security schemes. Slovenian state supported work–life policies, including leave arrangements and subsidized child care provisions, was relatively generous, and has remained almost unchanged during the transition period. Indeed, some new policies were introduced recently (paternity leave and the right to work part-time until the child is three). However, with political and economic independence, labor market conditions have become more precarious (see also Kanjuo Mrčela and Černigoj Sadar 2011). With the transition to the market economy, flexible working practices have been introduced in some firms; however, the proportion of employers offering flexible work remains low. Generally, in Slovenia, work–family reconciliation is viewed as a personal matter requiring state rather than organizational intervention. Managers are expected to follow the law and should have little discretionary power to deny or initiate policies.

In the UK, in contrast, the business case for work–life policies has been emphasized, stressing the potential benefits for organizations such as reduced absenteeism and turnover (Lewis 1999).

<sup>1</sup> Dependency arguments—that is, offering work–life policies to valuable workers—is congruent with this approach.

In the Netherlands during the 1990s, the integration of work and family life was framed as a shared responsibility between the state, social partners (employer organizations, and trade unions), and parents. Social partners and individual employers are encouraged to supplement state provisions by collective agreements and/or company policies (den Dulk 2001). More recently, business case arguments entered the debate (Smithson and Lewis 2005), which may promote dependency considerations among Dutch managers. Today, the Dutch welfare state can be characterized neither as the worst nor the best case for supporting working parents, offering relatively short leaves and a modest supply of formal childcare (den Dulk and van Doorne-Huiskes 2007). Childcare in the Netherlands is characterized by a tripartite funding structure in which employer, parents, and government contribute to the cost. Until 2007,

employers' contributions were voluntary but are now obligatory (one-third of the costs, shared between employers of both parents). Of children under the aged of four, 24 percent are enrolled in formal childcare centers for a few days a week (between two and three days), compared with 8 percent of school-aged children in after-school care (MinOCW 2007).

Part-time employment has long been promoted as a work–family strategy. In the Netherlands, 75 percent of working women are part-time, compared with 42 percent in the UK and 11 percent in Slovenia (Employment in Europe 2009), and this is connected to the strong preference for family care for young children (Doorne-Huiskes and den Dulk forthcoming). In the Netherlands and Britain, the one-and-a-half earner family is dominant while most Slovenian families combine two full-time jobs with the care for children (OECD family database 2010). This is partly related to the limited availability of part-time employment, the tradition of public childcare, and economic considerations (see Kanjuo Mrčela and Černigoj Sadar 2011).

Although industrialized countries differ in the extent to which the traditional male breadwinner role is dominant, women still normally bear the main responsibility for family and household. These “gendered” expectations influence managerial attitudes and decision-making on work–life policies (Lyness and Kropf 2005). Within this article a gender perspective is integrated in the analysis; however, a full analysis of the gendered nature of organizational discourses is beyond the scope of this article (Lewis, Brannen, and Nilsen 2009).

Thus, the aim of this article is to explore how managers in financial sector organizations in three countries talk about and conceptualize work–life policies: do they frame their responses in terms of disruption or dependency or do they use other discourses? To what extent does this vary across a specific firm sector in different national contexts?

### Research Design

Research on management has been criticized for its lack of focus on context (Bamberger 2008). The perspectives and behaviors of managers need to be understood within multiple, intersecting layers of context (Smith and Meiskins 1995; Nilsen, Brannen and Lewis forthcoming). Therefore, a multiple case study approach was used to explore managers' perspectives on work–life policies. Cases were selected in the same sector within different national welfare state contexts to illuminate how processes at different layers of context intersect and are reflected in decisions relating to work–life policies.

Case-oriented comparative method can address the complexity in analyzing work–life issues in organizations in three different countries (Ragin 1987; Crompton 2001).

A common difficulty within this approach, however, is the problem of commensurability (Crompton 2006). In this study, we addressed this issue by working with a cross-national research team, comprising members from the countries studied, enabling us to reflect on the meaning of the concepts before and during data gathering and throughout the analysis. In addition, thick description of the organizational environments enabled us to highlight contextual factors impinging on the different organizations. Our aim was to explore how national institutional features and specific organizational circumstances provide a context for understanding managers' perspectives on work–life policies. It should be emphasized that these influences cannot be considered to be directly causal as is often claimed in quantitative research.

Qualitative data were collected in three financial organizations, in the UK, the Netherlands, and Slovenia, as part of an EU-funded research program; the Transitions project.<sup>2</sup> The financial sector is often known for its favorable working conditions (Fagan and Walthery 2011), and as such, are not representative for all sectors and workplaces. This tends to be a sector with relatively highly educated employees, of which a high proportion is women. Studying managers in this context may reveal how gender plays a role in managerial discourses. The proportion of women employees varies between 37 percent in the Dutch case to 76 percent of all employees in the Slovenian case (see table 2).

Data were collected in BIC, a large Dutch banking and insurance company, PEAK, a British insurance company, and SAVA, a Slovenian bank. The Dutch company was known for good working conditions and flexibility. The UK company was attempting to forge a new workplace culture based on flexibility and trust following recent mergers and acquisitions. Many PEAK employees felt that the new culture gave more power to managers. The Slovenian company mostly adhered to labor laws and social provisions. All three organizations were in a process of change, adapting to the demands of the global economy, for SAVA this has been seen in the heightened by privatization and restructuring following the transition toward a market economy (see table 2 for an overview). BIC and PEAK were undergoing mergers and restructuring resulting in uneven experiences of change within firms, as some departments disappeared while others remained fairly stable. In SAVA, the restructuring created more workload for some departments, especially in IT. PEAK has witnessed many redundancies; this was less the case at BIC and



Table 2. Overview of selected cases

	BIC	PEAK	SAVA
Work force	30,000	4,500	1,000
Work–life policies	Above national average	Above national average	Only statutory
Organizational change	Merger and restructuring	Merger and restructuring	Privatization and changing market, restructuring
Work intensification	Yes	Yes	Yes
Line manager more responsible for HR policies	Yes, downsized HR	Yes, move from HR policy to culture change	Yes
Formal/informal culture	Formal, but consensus based	Informal trust based	Formal, in some units informal culture
% female employees	37	50 (estimate)	76
Skills of most workers	High	High	Medium/High
Part-time work	Usual	Usual	Unusual

SAVA. In all three organizations, employees and managers experienced work intensification. Slovenian organizations have been affected by the same processes found across Europe, such as intense market globalization and liberalization, but they also faced changes in the political system, in economy and technology, as well as the consequences following EU membership.

Line managers were responsible for the implementation of HR policies, including work–life policies. However, in Slovenia, with a tradition of representative decision-making and well-developed public work–life policies, HR paid relatively little attention to work–family issues. They were more high profile in BIC and PEAK.

Working conditions in the three financial firms were generally good compared with the national average in their country at the time of the study. All offered part-time work and flexible start and finishing hours. BIC followed the Dutch Act on Adaptation of Working Hours (2000) providing the right to reduce or extend working hours unless this strongly interferes with business needs. Moreover, following the collective agreement in the banking sector, BIC had a 36-h work week and permitted different work schedules, such as a compressed work week (for example, working four days of nine hours). These sector-specific work arrangements were used by around one-third of BIC employees at the time of the research. This specific work schedule was particularly popular with male employees; women more often worked part-time (Peper, den Dulk, and Doorne-Huiskes 2009). At SAVA, parents with young children could work part-time until the child was three following a 2003 Law on labor relations. In practice, this was almost the only form of part-time work. Utilization of part-time work schedules was low within SAVA, following the pattern in most firms in the country (see Kanjuo Mrčela and Černigoj Sadar 2011). Within BIC and PEAK, part-time work was more common. All three organizations offered sick leave, maternity leave, parental leave, short-term care leave, or emergency leave. Data from SAVA and BIC showed that mainly women use these different types of leave; male workers rarely use leave arrangements. The data on take up of these leave policies were not available in PEAK. In SAVA, as is normal in Slovenia, parental leave is widely used by women (Rener et al. 2005). Within the Netherlands all employed women take up maternity leave but take up of parental leave is much lower (27 percent) (Portegijs, Boelens, and Olsthoorn 2004). Within BIC, take up of parental leave is below the national average: 10 percent of workers used parental leave in 2003 (Peper et al. 2009). Most leave arrangements in the three case studies had a statutory basis (see table 1). BIC supplemented the Dutch Parental Leave Act with extra time and had an

annual budget of 0.5 percent of the total gross amount spent on salaries, for childcare. PEAK had recently closed a crèche but provided childcare vouchers.

### *Methods*

Analysis of company documents and focus groups with employees<sup>3</sup> provided contextual background for the interviews. Eight managers were interviewed at PEAK; five men and three women (see tables 3 and 4), including supervisors, HR managers, and department managers. Four were parents; two expecting their first child and two had no children. Seven managers were interviewed at SAVA, two men and five women, including two directors, three department managers, an HR manager and a supervisor who was also a trade union representative. All except the HR manager were parents. At BIC, twenty-one managers were interviewed, including directors, team managers, project managers, an HR manager, and product/account managers. Most had children.

Semi-structured interviews typically lasted an hour, during office hours, and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were based on a jointly developed interview guide, structured for comparability between the countries, although the respondents were given space to expand on topics. Transcripts were analyzed thematically; first for each organization separately and then compared for similarities and differences.

### Findings: Managers and Work–Life Policies

Below we first discuss the organizational context and the way work–life policies were framed in the three cases. This is followed by a discussion of the managerial discourses of disruption, dependency, and other discourses found among the managers in the three cases. Finally, we discuss similarities and differences between managerial discourses among the cases.

Table 3. Case study characteristics

	Country	Industry	No. of manager interviews
PEAK	UK	Insurance	8
BIC	Netherlands	Banking and insurance	21
SAVA	Slovenia	Banking	7

Table 4. Summary of characteristics in manager interviews

	PEAK	BIC	SAVA
Sex	Five men; three women	Fifteen men and six women	Five women and two men
Age	Five in 30s, three in 40s or older	Thirty-two till fifty-six	Thirty-five till sixty
Full/part time	Seven full time, one part time	Three part time (32 h), eighteen full time (36–40 h)	Full time
Age of youngest child	2, expecting; 2, age 0–4; 1, age 5–7; 1, adult; 2 childless	6, no children; 10, age 0–12; 10, age 13–19; 1, age 25–30	1, no children; 1, age 4–7; 1, age 14–18; 4, age 20 or older
Education	1 (degree), 1 (school-18), 5 (school-16), 1 unknown	3 secondary education, 18 higher education (college or university)	1 compulsory education, 6 tertiary education
Household situation	7 married, 1 cohabiting	16 married, 3 co-habiting, 2 single mom	1 single; 1 divorced mom, 5 married/cohabiting

*Framing of Work–Life Policies in the Organization*

Work–life policies were not framed as a strategic company policy in any of the cases. At BIC, this was reflected in the lack of management awareness about relatively new policies including short-term care leave. Managers rarely anticipated possible requests, or the impact that granting a request might have for the rest of the team. At SAVA, the marginalization of work–life policies in the organization was illustrated by managers' implicit or explicit rejection of organizational responsibilities.

*I think it is wrong that companies would help (with childcare) here . . . it has to be organized on the state level. It (the state) has the money from taxes . . . and if it is organized in the whole Slovenia it is much cheaper.* (SAVA, male line manager, father of one adult child)

At SAVA, the reconciliation of work and family was perceived to be an individual or a state responsibility. The organization did not consider additional ways to support parents. The BIC managers accepted a larger role for employers in a context in which employers' organizations, trade unions, and individual organizations were viewed as important actors for developing tailor-made facilities to meet the needs of employers and employees. The Dutch finance managers presented their organization as decent and caring with good policies for working parents. But they expected employees to also consider the needs of the organization.

*The managers understand there must be time for the family. But not for any price. You're here with a business interest; we have a contract that concerns duties and privileges for all parties. If you want to stay a healthy and professional organization, it's necessary to watch that carefully.* (BIC, male manager, no children)

Some BIC managers felt policies were too extensive and conflicted with organizational goals (also noted by some managers in SAVA and PEAK). In PEAK, work–life policies were connected to a rhetoric of mutual flexibility and trust. There was a strategic drive to develop a distinctive culture for the new merged company. Managers described shifts to a more people-focused culture, based on trust, mutual flexibility, and self-management at all levels. The emphasis on a less hierarchical structure and greater team and individual autonomy was the primary reason given for a shift from formal to informal flexitime, that is, from a clocking in system to a

more “contemporary,” trust-based approach, which was more dependent on good management and on good working relationships

*I'd say from my perspective we've got quite a lot of trust within the department, when people, rather than say they need to leave early they'll come and say, I need to leave early but I'll be doing extra hours to catch up. (PEAK, male manager, one child)*

Employees were supposed to be supported to exercise mutual flexibility to meet their own and the business needs, with a reliance on managerial trust rather than formal HR policies. In theory, PEAK seemed to be moving beyond formal work–life policies toward a work-organizational culture that would empower parents to exercise agency in making decisions about how to manage work and family. However, there was discrepancy between discourse and policy, and the actual practices, which were likely to remain more traditional. Moreover, the shift at PEAK toward a more informal approach increased managerial discretion to a larger degree than is the case within BIC and SAVA where work–life policies were framed as entitlements and formal policies.

In all three cases, most managers were aware of their key role in policy implementation. They decided on leave, short-term absences, overtime hours, and assessed work effectiveness. They noted that women requested work–life policies more often than men.

*You don't tend to get the men coming to you saying oh my child's sick I need to go home, but no, I've never known that to happen, . . . , I still think the women take the major responsibility in childcare. (PEAK, female manager, two adult children)*

Work–life issues were mainly seen as work–family issues, and framed as a women's issue, which is strongly related to the motherhood culture in all three countries. The traditionally strong breadwinner culture in the Netherlands has persisted, despite the enormous increase in female employment, reflected in a strong motherhood culture (Morgan 2006), and the dominance of the one-and-a-half earner family in which the mother works part-time and the father full time. There are more mixed attitudes toward the importance of motherhood in relation to work and care in the UK, but ideals of motherhood still underlie most work–life policies (Kremer 2007). Slovenia has a longstanding dual breadwinner culture, but caring work is still mainly attributed to women, reflected in managers' discourses:

*Mother's career is one thing, father's career is another thing. However I must say that we have the case of a female manager who took only maternity leave while the parental leave was taken by her husband but it is more or less an exception. (Sava, female HRM director, no children)*

Moreover, managers reported that the use of work–life policies contains a *tacit understanding of the trade-off* that career trajectories will be affected (at least for the early care years) if one decides to work part-time or take long-term leaves. Work–life policies are assumed to be gender neutral policy but are predominantly used by women. Like fathers in [Hobson and Fahlén's study \(2009\)](#), men in these three cases had limited capabilities and agency freedom to reduce working hours. This was explicit in BIC when managers discussed the possibilities for men to use these policies.

*For men they are less tolerant, I think. There is also a different picture per manager. Most managers think (after a child birth of an employee), now it is over, your wife will organize everything at home, and you start working again. So, when a man calls for parental leave, it is possible, but managers will frown. It is certainly not common at the higher positions. (BIC, male director, no children)*

At PEAK too, it was assumed that managers must work full-time and women managers' requests for reduced hours were accepted but involved demotion to nonmanagerial work. Gendered assumptions in PEAK and BIC limited men's capabilities to take-up work–life policies and often women's career progression. In contrast, as part-time work was a relatively new arrangement in SAVA, possible career consequences were rarely discussed, but opportunities to reduce working time remained limited.

#### *Managerial Discourses*

Further analysis revealed three discourses. A disruption discourse was particularly apparent among middle managers to justify restricting use of work–life policies. Dependency considerations were also expressed, particularly among PEAK managers. An ethical discourse in which managers considered support for working parents as a “moral right thing to do” appeared among BIC and SAVA managers. The managerial discourses in each of the three cases are discussed subsequently.

*PEAK, the UK case.* At PEAK, where the business argument prevailed, managers drew on both dependency and disruption discourses. They talked about the potential disruptiveness of work–life

arrangements, in relation to operational needs, and about planning difficulties and the struggle to meet competing demands of employees and their departments.

*One of my temporary managers requested to go part-time a few months ago, I didn't refuse part-time hours, I said what we'd have to do is find a replacement for the day that she wasn't here, but the day she wanted off was the Friday and I couldn't accommodate that cos I've got other managers that are off on Fridays a....., she specifically wanted Friday off and I had to refuse that...we've just offered her another position, where she can actually have Friday off if she wants. (PEAK, female manager, two adult children)*

This woman manager found a strategy for accommodating to the needs of a temporary member of staff, albeit in a less-interesting position. Those managers who resisted flexibility at PEAK often drew on a *disruption* argument. While official entitlement to flexible working policies is available for most employees, the reality depends on how managers perceive their department's operational needs. For example, the need for people to service phones throughout working hours was viewed as a rationale for set hours. Non-public-facing departments had more flexible hours, and staff in sales departments could usually work from home at least some of the time. The same woman manager commented that:

*Some jobs can be more flexible than others, I mean we have a call team and I find that really hard, because we have to have people on the phone at certain times, so it's not as flexible as the back office teams because if somebody's not there for 15 minutes we could lose 20 phone calls or something like that. (PEAK, female manager, mother of two adult children)*

Based on dependency theory, Klein et al. (2000) argue that employees who are most difficult to replace and on whom the manager “depends” for departmental performance have most power in negotiations and are most likely to have requests to use work–life policies granted, even if this causes disruption. Managerial discourses at PEAK emphasized *dependency*. In keeping with national discussions of the business case and the company rhetoric of a drive for flexibility, trust, and empowerment, there was an implicit assumption that employers depended on their workforce and therefore needed to “keep them happy” by meeting their flexibility needs.

*...in becoming more business focused what they've done is focus on the employees and asked them you know what is it*



*that you want, what can we do for you and, no, no longer do people want to work well, ... a percentage of people no longer want to work just 9 till 5. . . .* (PEAK, female manager, two children)

Some PEAK managers considered themselves “new style” in contrast to the more autocratic “old style” managers who did not accept the business case for supporting work–family needs. The discourse of the new culture and management style emphasized the dependency argument, while for the old style managers the disruption argument was used as a reason for not implementing flexibility and trust, despite the drive for work-organizational cultural change. All managers interviewed presented themselves as “new style” managers, emphasizing the focus on trust and mutual responsibility and concern for employee well-being.

*I don't monitor the number of hours everybody does every week ... that might be done in other departments, from my perspective as long as ..each week we've maintained our service efforts then ... people who want to leave early five, four o'clock, three o'clock, then they leave early it's no problem ... but equally people can volunteer to do extra hours just to catch up. So it's a bit of give and take now ... I don't see any point in monitoring how many hours people do because we have that trust there.* (PEAK, male senior manager, one child)

*In the department I'm in at the moment we're doing quite a lot of overtime at the weekends and trying to encourage people you know don't burn yourself out, don't come in Saturday and Sunday or if you're going to do both perhaps just do ..a few hours each day, ..because ... it has a knock on effect during the week.* (PEAK, female supervisor, no children)

Thus, the business case discourse in UK policy was reflected in both disruption discourses for some managers and dependency in others. The working practices associated with the dependency discourse had more potential to promote freedom to reconcile work and family for the valued workers, but this could result in inequities and agency inequalities for those on whom managers are less dependent. Moreover, inconsistencies between managers reduced opportunity structures for employees overall to exercise agency in their planning.

*BIC, the Dutch case.* In BIC, planning issues were discussed by managers in relation to work–life policies, as well as discussions of the struggle to meet competing demands of employees and their departments.

*If you focus on one individual employee, I don't think it really matters. But if you look at the whole department, then there are a lot of gaps: one has a free day on Monday, the other on Tuesday and the third on Wednesday, etc. It's hard to find a moment when everybody is present. From that perspective it's maybe better to close the door on Friday, it's nearly empty anyway. It's not the kind of job where you can replace someone easily.* (BIC, male director, no children)

*It is hard to find a moment to communicate with all my part-timers. That's because there are no moments that everybody is present.* (BIC, male manager, no children)

Managers also talked of the ramifications of agreeing to request for flexible working on social cohesion and solidarity in their groups.

*I think there is some sort of injustice. . . . It is difficult to sell to the rest of the team that someone, who already works part time, also takes extra leave.* (BIC, male team manager, father of two children)

However, they recognized that these difficulties were not a consequence of work–life policies per se but because resources for replacement were rarely available and the workload often remained the same, increasing work pressures for all.

*I lose hours, and don't get any replacement. It doesn't lead to a new vacancy, and therefore it means an extra burden for the rest of the team.* (BIC, male team manager, father of two children)

When flexibility was denied, this was, as in PEAK, based on a *disruption* argument, reflecting the agency gap between formal entitlements and daily practices. This difference is due to the way managers perceive the operational needs of their departments. BIC managers also differentiated between employees. They found part-time work in more senior roles more disruptive than among assistants. Moreover, when managers addressed the issue of part-time work, it was often linked to implicit gendered assumptions.

*No problem for assistants. But it becomes pretty difficult for employees with a higher position. If you got a woman who wants to work 2,5 days, you should have to find another woman who also wants to work 2,5 days. And precisely on the other days also. Because, men do not work part time. That would become really very awkward. I shouldn't know how you should deal with that.* (BIC, female project manager, no children)

The dependency discourse was less prominent, although some managers did argue that work–life balance policies that benefited employees would benefit the overall organization.

*If people are feeling comfortable because of a good work–life balance it will benefit the company.* (BIC, male team manager, no children)

We have made an analytical distinction between dependency and disruption arguments. However, in practice, managers may consider both types of arguments simultaneously. Managers wanted to grant leave requests to hard-working employees, but at the same time these employees would be missed the most during their absence.

*I find it more difficult to grant a hard working employee that request, compared to someone who works less hard, because I will not really miss the latter in practice when he starts working part time. On the other hand, someone who worked very hard has to be granted that request. So, it is a bit ambiguous. I will grant the request faster to the hard working employee, although it will damage my business.* (BIC, male manager, no children)

This more complex view of dependency suggests that at BIC it was less salient and explicit in the work–organizational culture than in PEAK.

A third discourse also emerged in BIC. For many managers, operating the delicate balance between meeting organizational output targets and being a good supervisor, supporting working parents (mothers), was experienced as the “right thing to do.” Several managers explicitly mentioned that private issues prevailed above work, particularly for new parents, or in crises.

*You know, that if someone has a child, first you get pregnancy leave and afterwards parental leave. And that is also necessary, because there changes so much in the lives of someone and his family. It is logical that you must find again that balance. Therefore I find parental leave in this also a complete logical consequence.* (BIC, male director, no children)

BIC managers revealed a sensitivity toward parents with young children. When there was a sick child, co-workers were prepared to step in.

*(. . .) people understand when something is wrong with the children. In those circumstances people are willing to say ‘I’ll take*

*over.’ That’s more culture than policy.* (BIC, male manager, father of two children)

Nevertheless, the management discourse at BIC on work–life balance was deeply gendered, which could increase tensions between mothers at the workplace and others who are childless. BIC managers talked about mothers needing to attend to emergencies at home and noted if there were many mothers in their department, this could create resentment, especially if childless employees had to take over work. On a more general level, support for combination of work and childcare reflected the corporatist nature of the Dutch welfare state which emphasizes a role for the employer as well as the state to be supportive. Furthermore, the moral discourse is embedded in the motherhood culture that places high-value parental care at home. The moral discourse was also related to dependency considerations when managers argued that people should be able to attend to their personal problems in order to be effective at work.

*They get the time they need. If an employee has a problem in his or her private life, work will be problematic too. Some will use work as a distraction, which is also a possibility. Sometimes, choosing for their private life will help people to get a better overview of the work they are doing here.* (BIC, male director, no children)

*SAVA, the Slovenian case.* In the Slovenian context of well-established statutory work–life policies but little experience of other flexible or part time work, managers in SAVA regarded part-time work or a temporary leave of absence as problematic if it affected work tasks. Some work–life policies were regarded as more disruptive than others. Paradoxically, short-term leave or occasional home working was considered less disruptive than well-established long-term parental leave that necessitates finding a suitable replacement, which is not always possible given financial constraints.

*At the moment I have two department managers on parental leave and at the beginning of their pregnancy the girls hesitated to inform me about their pregnancy but I said perfect, wonderful. Now at the beginning of the pregnancy lets find somebody who will replace you, let’s rearrange the work and find a solution how we shall manage the work until you come back (. . .) In practice I am without two department managers and I have replacement for them as we agreed, however it is not 100%, there are working tasks left behind.* (Sava, female manager, mother of one adult child)

However, there was an emerging discourse on the disruptiveness surrounding part-time work. Managers anticipated implementation difficulties, partly related to unchallenged assumptions about the organization of work. In much the same way as expressed by managers in BIC and PEAK, they saw problems in terms of replacement and intensification of work for team members linked to a tight labor force.

*We, directors are not much in favour of part time work. I could say that working process is so directed that it demands 8 hour working time.* (SAVA, female executive director, mother of two adult children)

*First of all I would have a talk with this parent to indicate a fact that the nature of work at the front office is such that it is not possible . . . that I as a manager could not burden the other workers for other part of his/her working day.* (SAVA, female manager, around 55, one child)

SAVA managers were generally positive about the take-up of leaves in relation to childcare, despite potential disruptiveness. Still, they indicated problems if several parents are on leave in one department, again because of lack of replacements.

*Now we have 6 or 8 parental leaves in our branch and 2 parental leaves are being replaced, not the rest of them, because as a rule there is no replacement for parental leaves. The colleagues have to do more of course . . . It cannot be the other way but they are being overburdened. . . .* (SAVA, female executive director of branch network, mother of one adult child)

Although managers did mention disruptiveness arguments when discussing the several forms of leave or flexible working, in contrast to PEAK and BIC, within SAVA this seldom led to actual denial of an employee's request, especially when it related to statutory provisions. Nevertheless, employees often had to accept a different position in the organization or reduced career opportunities.

*. . . employees are by law entitled to it (part time work)—and we can not discuss much about it. Another matter is where to place this employee. One (part-timer) per unit could be managed. But when there two or more we need to find other job position within other units of the bank.* (SAVA, female manager of local business network unit, mother of two children in secondary school)

Dependency discourse was rare in SAVA although a minority recognized that work–life policies could benefit the organization.

*If you fulfil his/her needs in one way or another, he/she will give back to you, My opinion is that everybody could work less. . . . You can not force him/her on the basis of formal rules/law to work more. It is more positive to motivate people and have their cooperation.* (SAVA, female network manager, two children in secondary school)

The HR manager at SAVA indicated that it was difficult to find suitable people for some key positions, but she mentioned only financial stimulus/benefits used in recruitment. In contrast to other organizational departments, in the IT department, there was a high level of time and place flexibility and an example of good team working, but even here the male manager did not express a dependency argument. As in BIC, a moral discourse was present among managers in SAVA. Managers said that they should care for people.

*We all approve if we only see the chance to do it. It is very human. . . . And we also know, together with coworkers, that everybody could find himself/herself in such situation – I think we always have found an agreement.* (SAVA, female network manager, mother of two children)

This was in particular true for relatively “old” policy measures like maternity and parental leave. The long tradition of statutory maternity and parental leaves had an impact on other decisions regarding time and place flexibility, but mainly for mothers. This was in tune with prevailing managers’ attitudes and public discourse about the gender division of parental tasks. Fathers rarely took up parental leave. Moreover, breast feeding was strongly encouraged and the combination of maternity and parental leave gave women the opportunity to do this for longer. Similar findings were found in a study within seven organizations in Slovenia (Kanjuro Mrčela and Černigoj Sadar 2007).

Thus, the moral discourse appeared mainly in relation to well-established parental leaves, predominantly for mothers. However, the tight staffing levels in the newly privatized institution often precluded replacements for those on leave, which created disruption issues, reduced managers’ capabilities to support parents, and potentially undermined parents’ (mothers) capabilities to use entitlements without negative career consequences.

### *Managerial Discourses across Cases*

In all three cases, disruption and dependency considerations were discussed to justify negative and positive responses respectively to requests to use work–life policies. The disruption discourse was

strong in BIC and PEAK despite the fact that both companies offered additional work–life policies in extent of national legislation. Disruption was an emerging discourse in SAVA in relation to increasing work intensification and staff shortages following the transition to a market economy. Perceived operational needs were paramount in this discourse in all the companies as managers grappled with relatively new provisions, high work intensification, and low organizational support, particularly in lean workforces. Historical tradition and current employment norms also came into play. For example, in SAVA, disruption considerations emerged regarding newly introduced legislation on part-time work. Managers lacked experience of organizing and coordinating part-time jobs in contrast to their British and Dutch counterparts for whom part-time employment was very common. However, managers were less likely to actually deny requests as a consequence of disruption arguments in the Slovenian context with less scope for discretion.

Managers in all three cases also voiced general dependency considerations, arguing that a good work–life balance created a committed and productive workforce. Dependency discourse was most dominant in PEAK where a business rationale supported a move from formal HR work–life policies to an informal culture of empowerment. PEAK management rhetoric of dependency was, however, often undermined in practice by disruption concerns.

Dependency considerations were strongly linked to the national UK debate on the work–life policy business case. In fact, dependency arguments fit the business case rationale. This may, however, conflict with ethical considerations in which equal access to work–life policies for all workers is emphasized. As a result, dependency considerations might remain an unspoken discourse. In SAVA and BIC dependency, considerations were less often articulated and appeared to be more linked to ethical considerations.

In practice, it appears that managers considered both type of arguments—disruption and dependency. The use of these apparently competing and contradictory discourses may reflect the issues and conflicts that managers faced to some extent in all the cases, in reconciling goals of supporting employees in combining work and family with operational needs to sustain productivity and effectiveness in the globally competitive finance sector. It is possible that globalization trends may have reduced managers' freedom of action even when they were mandated or predisposed to support parents, pushing managers, not only in the liberal UK context but also in the corporatist Dutch and post-socialist Slovenian contexts, closer to their counterparts in United States where disruption and dependency considerations were initially demonstrated. Nonetheless, the

resonance on the moral discourse in these firms suggests that local cultural and institutional factors also make a difference. Thus, for example the moral discourse expressed by BIC managers may be related to the Dutch context of high value of personal time and parental care at home, while in SAVA this discourse appears to have been embedded in a long history of entitlements to reconcile work and personal life. In PEAK, this was somewhat different. There was a strong discourse about “trust” and employees being “genuine” which were moral categories invoked by managers. This can be considered a discourse of moral expectations and norms focused on within-workplace moral values, rather than on the ethics of valuing people’s nonworking time, or their family lives.

Finally, underlying managers’ discourses on work–life balance policies in all three cases were deeply embedded gendered assumptions reflecting wider societal contexts.

## Discussion

Managers’ support for work–life policies is crucial for shaping employees’ capabilities to utilize them. Work–life policies, whether statutory or organizational, are implemented in specific workplaces, which are themselves located in shifting global and national contexts. Previous research demonstrates the crucial role of managers (den Dulk and de Ruijter 2008; Lewis 1997; Maxwell 2005; Wise and Bond 2003). Our findings contribute to the work–life policy literature by situating managers simultaneously within specific workplace and national layers of context. We have investigated how financial sector managers frame the utilization of work–life policies in organizations in different welfare states. Research in the United States identifies disruption and dependency considerations influencing managers’ decision-making. Our findings show that these considerations were also important in these European case studies. A further management discourse also emerged; the moral case. Despite differences in dominant discourses in the three cases, managers’ capabilities to maneuver and negotiate work–life balance politics for their employees was restricted by resource issues and subsequent disruption concerns in the current competitive global context.

We have compared specific organizations and cannot make definitive inferences about cross-national differences from this qualitative multiple case study design, nor was that our intention. Nevertheless, the study has revealed the ways in which layers of context—workplace, national, and global—combine to shape managers’ discourses about work–life policies. Work and family processes are not static. The findings reveal some of the complex and dynamic



processes whereby managers in these organizations in three European contexts make sense of the often-competing demands that they themselves face. Organizational context is the most important layer of context for understanding managers' perspectives, but managers' perspectives are also shaped by national and even global layers. National, historical, policy, and normative contexts underpin some of the variations in the processes observed in the three organizations, while global factors including competition and subsequent intensification of work may account for more of the convergence between managers (Smithson et al. *forthcoming*).

We did not investigate the impact of the role of managers on employees' experiences and capabilities as such, though this has been explored elsewhere (Lewis and den Dulk 2008; Lewis et al. 2009). Our study demonstrates the potential for highlighting processes at different layers of context and offers insight into how policies and practices at different institutional levels affect the experiences of managers and potentially, working parents.

There have been recent calls for more context-sensitive research in work–family research (Powell, Francesco, and Ling 2009). Our study underlines the importance of temporal aspects of context and the need for future research to examine the impact of important socio-economic changes as they impinge on parents' capabilities to combine work and family in diverse contexts. It is at the level of the firm that policies are translated into practices and where workers and managers have the capability to voice what they consider as valuable solutions to balance work and family life (Bonvin and Farvaque 2003).

The differences and similarities in managers' perspectives and the barriers they face in supporting parents are important aspects of the overall context shaping employee capabilities to utilize policies. Employees' experiences of work and family have not been the focus of this article. However, at the individual level, cognitive aspects of capabilities include a sense of entitlement to adapt working time to the needs of families and personal life (Hobson and Fahlén 2009; Lewis and Smithson 2001). Previous research suggests that sense of entitlement to work–family support may be greater in welfare states based on a gender equality contract such as the Nordic countries, than elsewhere, but that individual sense of entitlement can also be raised where there is a strong business case discourse. This suggests that both dependency and moral discourses may enhance situated agency to reconcile work and personal life (Lewis and Smithson 2001). The disruption discourse, which is more related to structural resources, may be associated with reduced capabilities to take-up and benefit from work–life policies. Future research could examine

the dynamic relationships between managers' perspectives on policies in diverse contexts and employee capabilities to use work–life initiatives to live the lives that they value.

Aspects of capabilities including sense of entitlement and freedom to determine how to use time are highly gendered (Cornelius and Skinner 2008; Robeyns 2003). This is also reflected in our findings. Gender-blindness in many of the policies and official organizational discourses obscures gendered managerial and employee practices and beliefs. In all three cases, work–life issues were viewed by managers as primarily women's issues. In Slovenia, despite longstanding fathers' entitlements, part-time work and women were conflated in the views of the BIC managers. There was also a constant, explicitly stated assumption at Peak by male and female managers, that child-care was primarily a woman's responsibility—an assumption they applied to their private lives as well as to their managerial actions. This gendered thread throughout the data suggests that men's capabilities for utilizing policies is likely to remain low in all the cases, reinforcing and reproducing gendered inequalities, and limiting agency of women and men in relation to work and family (Hobson and Fahlén 2009).

## NOTES

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1. In the UK, policies regarding childcare were not only framed as a business case at the time of the study. In the New Labour years, childcare for children in need was often part of an educational drive to reduce inequalities and child poverty while childcare support for working parents was more framed as a business case.

2. This project, *Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace* (short name *Transitions*) was funded by the European Union. See [www.workliferesearch.org/transitions](http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions). The Transitions team included: Suzan Lewis, Janet Smithson, Christina Purcell, and John Howarth, then at Manchester Metropolitan University; Julia Brannen and Michaela Brockmann, Thomas Coram Institute, University of London; Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, Laura den Dulk, Bram Peper, and Marijke Veldhoen-van Blitterswijk, Utrecht University; Siyka Kovacheva and Atanas Matev, Paissii Hilendarski State University, Plovdiv; Ann Nilsen, Sevil Summer, and Lise Granlund, University of Bergen; Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and Lars Plantin, University of Göteborg; Nevenka Ĕernigoj Sadar, Jana Nadoh, and Polona Kersnik, University of Ljubljana; Maria das Dores Guerreiro, Pedro Abrantes, Inês Pereira, and Inês Cardoso, CIES/ISCTE; Jeanne Fagnani, MATISSE, University of Paris 1-CNRS.

3. Not the focus of this study.

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